



Germans from Russia: An Introduction

A BRIEF HISTORY

Catherine the Great's Manifest – 1762/3

In 1761, German-born Catherine the Great, became empress of the Russian Empire. At the time of her rise to power, Russia was an underdeveloped agricultural land, lagging behind the development of Western Europe. Her solution was to invite her fellow Germans to come to Russia and cultivate the land. Catherine's first formal invitation was extended in 1762, but it elicited little response. After some thought, Catherine decided to add some benefits for coming to Russia. In the second manifesto of July 1763, Catherine proclaimed that German emigrants would receive the following:

- free transportation to areas of settlement
- free land and interest free loans
- the right to create their own self-ruled colonies
- religious freedom and the right to build churches and schools
- thirty years of tax exemption
- exemption from military service

These privileges were not only extended to the German immigrants, but to their children and descendants, even if they were born in Russia.¹ For Germans who had recently experienced years of wars, invasions and religious persecution, the benefits listed in Catherine's manifest were very appealing.²

Alexander I's Invitation – 1804

In the late eighteenth-century, the Russian Empire obtained areas of eastern Poland as well as Turkish lands and the Crimea to the south. These new areas were in need of settlement, and the solution came when, in 1804, Alexander I repeated Catherine the Great's invitation. Nearly 50,000 Germans from southern and western Germany emigrated.³

¹ Catherine Alekseyevna, "Manifesto of Catherine the Great," translated from German to English by Ingeborg W. Smith, *Germans from Russia Heritage Collection*, Fargo, ND, nds.u.edu/grhc.

² Arthur Kramer, "Migration of Germans to Russia," *American Historical Society of Germans From Russia* (January 1985).

³ Arthur Kramer, "Migration of Germans to Russia," *American Historical Society of Germans From Russia* (January 1985).

Emigration and Migration Groups

Volga River Germans –18th-19th Centuries

In the first five years following Catherine the Great's invitation, nearly 8,000 families (27,000 individuals) left their German homelands in Hesse, Wurttemberg and the Palatinate to become colonists in Russia. After a difficult voyage across the Baltic Sea, Germans spent a few weeks to months in temporary settlements near St. Petersburg before traveling to their new homes along the Volga River in southeastern Russia. German immigrants founded 104 "mother" colonies clustered along the Volga River, two-thirds of which were formed by Lutherans, while Catholics accounted for the other third. As time went on, new "daughter" colonies were settled nearby to allow for the growth in population.⁴

Black Sea Germans – 19th Century

Approximately 50,000 Germans were among the first responders to Alexander I's 1804 invitation. These German emigrants primarily traveled overland and eventually settled on the northern coast of the Black Sea in Odessa and Bessarabia. Throughout the 1840s, Germans also traveled south and established villages between the Danube river and the Black Sea. Much like the Volga River Germans, as the population grew, land availability decreased, mandating the need to spread out and form daughter colonies.⁵

Volhynia Germans – 19th Century

What sets Volhynia apart from other settlement areas in the Russian Empire is that most settlements did not come through governmental support, but rather through private interests. In 1816, Germans from Danzig and the Palatinate came to this region as tenant farmers and worked on the estates of landlords. Fifteen years later, following the Polish Revolt of 1831, many Germans living in Congress Poland decided to move to Volhynia. The third wave of emigrants from Germany arrived in 1861, after the second Polish Revolt. At about the same time, serfdom was abolished in Russia, and estate owners, having lost their cheap and ready supply of labor, were in need of tenants and buyers. Germans escaping the Polish revolt proved to be excellent candidates.⁶

Decline and Emigration of the Germans from Russia – 1871-1917

In 1871, Alexander II revoked the unique rights given to Germans by Catherine the Great's 1763 manifesto. Germans were no longer exempt from military service and were required to conform to Russian laws. After 1871, thousands of Germans, particularly Mennonites and Hutterites,

emigrated to the United States, Canada and South America. As time progressed, conditions for Germans living in Russia steadily declined. Poor economic conditions, famines and increasing anti-German sentiment pushed many Germans to leave Russia.⁷

⁴ Adam Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev* (Marian Press: Battleford, Saskatchewan, Canada, 1974).

⁵ Adam Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev* (Marian Press: Battleford, Saskatchewan, Canada, 1974).

⁶ "Kurze Geschichte der Wolhynieendeutschen," *Wolhynien.de*, wolhynien.de.

⁷ Adam Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev* (Marian Press: Battleford, Saskatchewan, Canada,

Some Germans returned to their ancestral homelands in Germany; however, the majority emigrated to North or South America. Russian Germans were farmers, so they tended to settle in rural agricultural areas. In the United States, most Germans from Russia settled in the states of Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, Colorado and the western provinces of Canada. Others ended up in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay or Uruguay.⁸

Those Who Stayed Behind – Post 1917 Revolution

Following the 1917 Revolution and formation of the Soviet Union, conditions for Germans reached an all-time low. In the 1930s, Volga Germans experienced a forced starvation inflicted by the Soviet regime. Millions of people perished in this famine. Later, in 1941, Stalin began deporting Germans living in Russia to labor camps in Siberia and Central Asia. Many German colonies and communities were destroyed at this time.⁹

LOCATING THE TOWN

Determining the location of the hometown is essential to locating records. It is important to find both historic political and religious jurisdictions as well as the modern location:

- Gubernia (province) and Uyezd (county) help to locate revision list records.
- Parish helps to locate metrical records (church records)
- Modern location helps to determine where records are now located.

For an extensive list of resources you can use to help you find this information, see:

familysearch.org/en/wiki/Germans_from_Russia_Gazetteers

GENEALOGICAL SOCIETIES

There are several genealogical societies that work on acquiring, translating, and preserving records for Germans from Russia.

- Germans from Russia Heritage Society (GRHS) – focused on the Black Sea: grhs.org/pages/home
- American Historical Society of Germans from Russia (AHSGR) – focused on the Volga: ahsgr.org/
- Society of German Genealogy in Eastern Europe (SGGEE) – focused on Volhynia and Russian Poland: sggee.org/

A village coordinator is an individual who has a lot of knowledge about a specific town or location. They can be a useful resource and can be located through GRHS and AHSGR.

1974); Arthur Kramer, "Migration of Germans to Russia," *American Historical Society of Germans From Russia* (January 1985).

⁸ Gayla Aspenleiter, "Researching in South America," *Black Sea German Research*, blackseagr.org; Michael M. Miller, *Researching the Germans from Russia* (Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University: Fargo, ND, 1987), xvii.xix.

⁹ Adam Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev* (Marian Press: Battleford, Saskatchewan, Canada, 1974); Arthur Kramer, "Now They Left Russia," *American Historical Society of Germans From Russia* (January 1985).

CHURCH RECORDS

Lutheran Religious Jurisdictions

In 1832, Tsar Nicholas I created the General Evangelical Lutheran Consistory, which was divided into eight consistorial districts – six in the Baltics and two others: the St. Petersburg and Moscow Consistories. The St. Petersburg Consistory included the western part of the empire, extending down into the Black Sea area while the Moscow Consistory stretched eastwards into the Volga region, the Caucasus as well as Siberia and Central Asia (see the Lutheran Consistory Map above).



Each consistorial district contained individual parishes that often served multiple localities. Each parish was responsible for keeping records of baptisms, marriages and deaths. Beginning in January of 1833, parishes were also required to keep a duplicate copy of vital records to send to the consistorial headquarters. The St. Petersburg duplicate church book records are available through FamilySearch, while the location of the Moscow Consistory's duplicate church records is currently unknown.

Catholic Religious Jurisdictions

Catherine the Great established the Catholic Archdiocese of Mogilev in 1772, which served all Catholics who lived within the Russian Empire (see the Catholic Diocese of Mogilev map located below). In 1848, the Diocese of Kherson was established, and the boundaries of the diocese were drawn so as to include all of the German colonies. In 1852, the diocese was renamed and became the Diocese of Tiraspol (see the Catholic Diocese of Kherson/Tiraspol map located below). Individual parishes kept church records. Original church



records for the Black Sea region are available at the State Archives of the Saratov Oblast, while select Catholic records for the Volga region are available through FamilySearch.org.

Locating Church Records

For tips and links to find records (both indexed and images of records) for the Black Sea, Volga, and Volhynia regions, see: [familysearch.org/en/wiki/Germans_from_Russia_Church_Records](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Germans_from_Russia_Church_Records)

REVISION LIST RECORDS

In 1718, Peter the Great instituted a head tax known as the “soul” tax. In 1719, revision lists, or enumerations of the taxable population, were instituted. There were ten revisions taken sporadically between 1719-1858.

Published Translations

- Genealogical societies like AHSGR and GRHS work to index, translate, and publish revision list records. They are commonly referred to as “census” books. They can be purchased through the genealogical societies, and many are also available at the Family History Library. Most census books have an alphabetical index at the back and are organized in a tabular format.
- *The Emigration from Germany to Russia in the years 1763-1862*, by Dr. Karl Stumpp contains revision list indexes for the Black Sea area (incomplete information for Bessarabia) in part two of the book. You can access a digital version of the book at: archive.org/details/emigrationfromge00stum

Images

A very small portion of revision lists have been microfilmed and/or digitized. FamilySearch has a select collection of revision list records for the Black Sea and Volga regions. Note that some of

these records are duplicate copies, transport lists, or are not complete for entire colonies. To find these records see:

- Black Sea: [familysearch.org/en/wiki/Black_Sea_Germans#Revision_Lists](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Black_Sea_Germans#Revision_Lists)
- Volga: [familysearch.org/en/wiki/Revision_List_Records_for_Volga_Germans](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Revision_List_Records_for_Volga_Germans)